



John Tetpon

Photo courtesy Anchorage Daily News

Writer survives on inner strength

by Kathy Davey

for the Tundra Times

John Tetpon, Inupiaq Eskimo and *Anchorage Daily News* reporter, says his knowledge of self has been a source of strength in his battle to overcome prejudice.

Although Tetpon said he encounters little conflict now, his recent autobiographical article in the May 24 "We Alaskans" section of the *Anchorage Daily News* described the intolerance with which he was treated as a child.

From being called names and being forbidden to speak his Native language in school, to being restricted to a "Natives only" section of the movie theater, Tetpon and his Eskimo classmates were discriminated against at an early age.

"Sometimes, the only thing I could survive on was my inner strength," he said.

Tetpon worked as a coordinator for Indian education in the Anchorage School District and in the banking industry before he began his current career in journalism a year and half ago.

He started out as part-timer, writing obituaries, but he is now a full-time reporter.

Tetpon has two beats. He alternates writing one month for the metro section with a month for the features section.

Tetpon likes feature writing because it is not as rushed as hard-news reporting. There is time to develop a story, he said.

Tetpon said he likes to cover stories "that mean something," that are capable of bringing about changes, which, he believes "should be the intent of all newspapers."

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Tetpon said that being a reporter has always been a dream of his, but only recently was he able to realize that goal. He explained that he has six children, and when they were all living at home he could not afford to accept a relatively low-paying journalism job.

But now he is doing what he wants to do. "For, me, it is really satisfying," he said.

Tetpon's childhood was spent in Shaktoolik and Nome. When he was 13 years old, he moved with his family to Anchorage.

"I love it here," he said. "I've been all over the U.S. and in parts of Canada. I've tried living outside of Alaska, but I've always come back."

Tetpon explained that to him, everything that already has happened elsewhere is just now happening in the 49th state. "Alaska will never be boring," he said.

Although he is immersed in a Western environment, Tetpon said he still keeps the spirit of his Inupiaq heritage with him.

"It is a way of being," he said. "The Native people always believed in the integrity of another person."

Tetpon said that what he refers to as the "Nateness of my soul" has made him vulnerable. He said he learned the hard way that he must "switch gears in the newsroom and become a skeptic. . . I can't afford to take the word of anyone," he said.

On the job, Tetpon must assume this skeptical mask, and he says he recognizes the attraction of Western society's emphasis on profit. Yet, he remains an Alaska Native.

"I don't think a Native person can become completely Westernized," he said.

One of Tetpon's dreams is to write books. "The challenge is there," he said. "I have an opinion."

He feels he has something to say about what it means to be a human being, something which he feels is dealt with superficially in much of literature.

Although he has little time to devote to his aspiration, he asserted, tapping his chest: "There's a book being born

here."

Recently, Tetpon wrote of his experiences with an American Indian tradition: the sweat lodge ceremony. He described his article, which appeared June 12 in the *Anchorage Daily News*, as "the most difficult thing I've ever chosen to do."

He said the spirituality of the American Indian is similar to that of the Eskimo. "It brought me miles and miles closer to where I come from and to who I am," he said.

For now, Tetpon plans on continuing his journalism career and enjoying life with his new wife, Vicki, a real

estate marketing representative, whom he married May 28.

Tetpon has three grandchildren.

Despite social barricades which have threatened his progress, Tetpon said he harbors no bitter feelings. "I hope I'll never exercise reverse discrimination," he said. "I want to be better than that."